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General Assembly

Twenty-third special session

Official Records

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Wednesday, 7 June 2000, 10 a.m.
New York

President: Mr. Gurirab ..... (Namibia)

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Scale of assessments for the apportionment of the expenses of the United Nations (A/S-23/6/Add.1)

The President: Before turning to the item on our agenda for this morning, I should like to draw the attention of the General Assembly to document A/S-23/6/Add.1. In a letter contained in that document, the Secretary-General informs me that, since the issuance of document A/S-23/6, Antigua and Barbuda has made the necessary payment to reduce its arrears below the amount specified in Article 19 of the Charter.

May I take it that the General Assembly duly takes note of this information?

It was so decided.

Agenda items 8 and 9 (*continued*)

Review and appraisal of progress made in the implementation of the twelve critical areas of concern in the Beijing Platform for Action

Further actions and initiatives for overcoming obstacles to the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action

The President: The Assembly will now hear a statement by Her Excellency The Honourable Wandira Kazibwe, Vice-President of the Republic of Uganda.

Ms. Kazibwe (Uganda): Representatives have come here from all over the world to evaluate how far we have come since we were in Beijing five years ago. I would like to thank all of them for the efforts they have made and the struggles they have been through since we were in Beijing. The text of my country's statement will be distributed, so I will make a few comments on those areas where I think we need to put more emphasis or into which we should look further so as to ensure that the struggle for women's emancipation and for equality continues.

I must say that some things have been done in many countries. But much more must be done to achieve gender parity. In many countries, we are still struggling to get women recognized. In many countries we still have to explain the meaning of the word "gender". For many of us, the word "gender" never appeared in our English learner's dictionary — I do not know about the dictionaries that the French, Portuguese and Spanish speakers use. It is a word that each one of us needs to translate and interpret within our cultures, so that the resistance that appears to be coming from the opposite sex is reduced and so that roadblocks are not put in our way in our struggle.

Many countries have been saying that they have the political commitment. We must define what we mean by "political commitment". Is it only Governments that should make political commitments, or is it for civil society, too, to be committed to the struggle for women's emancipation and gender parity? In Uganda we have passed laws. Our Constitution is hailed as one of the most gender-sensitive constitutions in the whole world, even when it comes to identifying "he" or "she". In our country, when we say "he", we

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must also say "she", because women must be visible. So in all our documents, wherever we write "he", there should also be the word "she". In fact, we are saying that "she" must be the word that is used, because the word "she" includes the word "he".

However, despite the fact that we have a very gender-sensitive Constitution, we have also made laws to enforce the Constitution. But that is not enough. Policies and programmes in the country must be gender-sensitive. We must make sure that women must be seen. They must be visible even when they are not there. I want to remind all representatives about the visibility of their mothers, who were in every nook — even in the cupboard, when they were eyeing the sugar bowl. That is what we need to do so that all decision makers, policy makers and implementers know that if we do not do "A", "B", "C" and "D" the hand of a woman is ready to come down on us.

In Uganda, we consider education to be a very important area with regard to the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. We have said that every girl and every woman must have an education. Three years ago, we had fewer than 800,000 girls in primary education; right now we have over 3.3 million girls in school. This is a very progressive policy, and the programme is a very progressive programme, having evolved from the policy. But how do we keep these girls in school? As I said earlier, it is not enough to have the Constitution; we must have the policies and the programmes.

But we the activists must continue talking. We must continue asserting our ideas so that these girls stay in school. We have achieved 30 per cent participation by women in local government — in Parliament, it is only at 17 per cent. We have achieved that level of participation because, as women leaders, we realize that the critical areas that touch women's lives are to be found at the local government level. That is where women see their fellow women in action every day — there are not many women who even know what the parliamentary building looks like. So in our quest for good governance, we have ensured that the minimum of 30 per cent goes down to where the women are, and we have achieved levels greater than 30 per cent. All of our boards, which are put in place by Government, include representation by women.

My challenge now is civil society — the non-governmental organizations, the professional bodies and universities and other institutions of learning. We have put too much emphasis on what government has done. The non-governmental organizations have put more emphasis on the implementation of what government wants them to do in those areas where government provides a conducive environment. But what have the professional bodies done to ensure that we put the emphasis in the right place so as to enable us to move in the direction on which we agreed in Beijing?

We need a strong civil society, and I would like to urge colleagues here who are representing government not to fear a strong civil society. A strong civil society is good for government, just as a good strong government is good for civil society. In Uganda, we complement each other. We learn from each other, and that is why we have been able to move ahead, because in Beijing we committed ourselves to working with everybody, to networking, in order to ensure that we achieve our objectives.

However, we must note that there is also too much criticism, even when there are no ideas generated to improve on what is being done. We should therefore work together to ensure that when there is a mistake, and when we could improve, we are in a position to move forward. Another area of concern to us in Uganda is the tapping of local expertise. Many times we see a problem that is specific to us as individuals, and we make it a global problem. We need to do more studies in our localities, to interpret our cultures, to interpret how we are going to incorporate our traditional and non-traditional religions internationally into our gender struggle.

In Uganda, we say, "Think globally, but act locally." We need local agendas. While we have statistics showing what has happened all over the world, we need each country to account to its people, we need each country's leadership to account to the last woman in every village regarding what it has done to achieve what we agreed in Beijing. We must therefore continue to disaggregate data on women, not only on women as women, but to go further and look at youth and at women with disabilities. I must say that in many countries, this has not been done. In Uganda we have started on this struggle; we have even appointed a Minister who is a woman with a disability, and she is handling issues relating to people with disabilities and the elderly. Old women have problems too, and they also rank among the poorest of the poor.

When it comes to the way forward, I must say that many times when we come here we talk about issues that affect women as women, and we do not speak out about those areas which are a must if we are to have women's emancipation. We should talk more about peace and conflict, not only the conflict that brings war, but also the conflict that stops development in our countries. We must talk about the eradication of mass illiteracy, because this is the cause of poverty that is bedevilling many of our countries. We must talk about skills for survival, so that our people have food security, and also become rich — not only rich materially, but also spiritually. We must not be caught in the trap of what is said at the international level. When someone refers to "women's empowerment", all of us go for that, but what does women's empowerment mean for that woman in your village? Now now we are talking about e-commerce. What does e-commerce mean to that woman in your village, when her biggest problem is productivity and improving the quality of what she produces?

We need roads, we need electricity, we need water for production. Without these, you can build a wonderful hospital for women to deliver wonderful children, but if there is no road to take this woman there, she will still die walking to the hospital. We need science teachers, we need doctors, we need engineers, we need experts at every level, and therefore we should talk more about what we envision achieving at the highest level, instead of mere survival. Those of us from countries that are bedevilled by debt should therefore cry out to have the debt cancelled. I can tell the Assembly that in Uganda, because we have had at least part of our debt cancelled, we are able to put part of this money into poverty eradication programmes. That is why we can keep our children in school, that is why you hear so much about Uganda doing so well. As a Government we are transparent, and whatever money we would have paid back as debt, we are putting into programmes that affect women. Let us call out and demand that these debts be cancelled. The money did not actually stay in our countries, most of it even went back where it came from. We should call out for that debt cancellation so that we can move forward.

I would like to ask you, Mr. President, to break with protocol. I am the President of the African Women's Committee on Peace and Development, and I would now like to call upon a woman who is a Minister in my country and has been called upon to represent women with disabilities from Africa, women who are still disadvantaged. According to protocol, there are only country statements, but women with disabilities do not have a country speaking for them: it is their disability which will speak. I would like to call on this young lady from Uganda, who will give her testimony. In Uganda our Constitution enjoins us to give affirmative action to women, affirmative action to youth and affirmative action to people with disabilities. People with disabilities must be in Parliament, and youth must be in Parliament, because if they are not there, their voices will not be heard. In Beijing I said that is only the one who has that scar who knows how much it itches. If that scar is not on your body, you will not know how to scratch it. Certainly I was lucky not to suffer from polio. She is the only one who can speak for the people with disabilities, and I would like to ask her to say something before I conclude my statement.

Ms. Sekabira (Uganda): I am Florence Nayiga Sekabira, 37 years old, married, with a baby boy of four months. I am a Member of Parliament for people with disabilities. I am a product of the affirmative action that is embraced by the Ugandan Constitution. I am a Minister of State in the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, in charge of disability and elderly affairs. I want to seize this opportunity, on behalf of women with disabilities on the African continent, to raise these concerns.

We express our concern that the review of the Beijing Platform for Action has already made reference to progress and challenges for women and girls with disabilities during the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. This is manifested inspite of the absence of statistical evidence regarding the impact on women and girls with disabilities in regional and country reports. We have not been featured or represented in most country forums that discuss the status of women. This is also true for women who are elderly. We therefore demand that the leadership of women at the national, regional and international levels make concerted efforts to involve women and girls with disabilities, together with elderly women, and that all the international and national legal instruments make special reference to our concerns.

We wish to stress that continued exclusion and marginalization of women and girls with disabilities and elderly women are in themselves an abuse of human rights. We are women, girls with disabilities and older women, although we face challenges resulting

from our disabilities and age. We therefore call upon all players in the development process, including United Nations agencies, Governments, non-governmental organizations and the private sector, to commit themselves and ensure equal distribution of resources to the cause of women, girls with disabilities and older women.

Ms. Kazibwe (Uganda): Florence Nayiga is testimony to the fact that, at least in my country, Uganda, education is the key emancipator of women, because if she were not educated, she would be in the village, crawling and begging. But she got educated and therefore, in our priorities in Uganda, we are putting emphasis on education. The laws can be there. You can talk about laws, but if you are not educated and you cannot survive on your own, you know that you are condemned to a life of suffering.

On behalf of the women of Uganda, I would like to thank the Secretary-General and the United Nations system for having worked very hard to ensure that this meeting took place. I know that a good number present here were not in Beijing, so it is pleasing to note that the momentum has been kept going. We want to urge representatives to continue ensuring that the United Nations system, the private sector and other institutions continue to support this noble cause. We must do more.

I would like to end by quoting the words of one of the Presidents of the United States. As we continue to struggle for our emancipation, not only must we do more as individuals, but we must remember this:

> "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."

The struggle continues.

The President: I thank the Vice-President of Uganda for her important statement.

I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Laurette Onkelinx, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Employment of Belgium.

Mrs. Onkelinx (Belgium) (*spoke in French*): Five years ago, this Assembly met to accomplish a task that gave rise to great hope. We mobilized in order to put the lie to those implacable words that appeared in the Human Development Report 1995: "In no society do women fare as well as men". Our goal was no less than to come up with the means to achieve equality for women and men in order to build a world that is more just and based on a logic of development and peace.

We knew very well that, after the initial enthusiasm, we would be told of the economic, social, cultural and religious obstacles to implementation. We would be asked for more time, more understanding. When obstacles emerge and problems appear, they must be faced and not avoided, the better to be forgotten.

The current situation confirms how much work remains to be done. An analysis also shows that, in order to overcome the inequalities that plague women everywhere, we must advance in the Beijing process through the affirmation of the universal right of women and men to equality, the adoption of policies that embody this right, cooperation between States and the assessment of commitments undertaken in solidarity. In sum, it would be irresponsible to signal any retreat today.

I take this opportunity to welcome the 5 February Luxembourg Declaration of the Francophonie Women's Conference, which exemplifies our stance.

The Human Development Report 1999 indicates that 70 per cent of the poor, or 1.3 billion people, are women. This figure reflects the scope of the economic imbalance burdening women. It also shows that poverty is a phenomenon that must grasped in the gender dimension. The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women largely contributed to women's being recognized as agents and full beneficiaries of sustainable development. It also contributed to progress towards a general and systemic concept of equality and highlighted the importance to the achievement of equality that account be taken of the links between economic, social and cultural issues through the 12 priority areas of the Beijing Platform for Action.

In its own way, and despite some felicitous developments, Belgium is an exemplar, through its own realities, of the observation that inequality is manifest through an imbalance that clearly works against women in all aspects of social, cultural, economic and political life. Women are concentrated in low-income sectors and in certain functions, as well as in atypical jobs. The average gap between male and female wages is over 20 per cent. More women than men experience long-term unemployment and are exposed to the risks of poverty and social exclusion. One out of every five

women is the victim of domestic violence. Women remain the minority in decision-making positions. Thus, in Belgium, much remains to be done.

And yet, the policy of equal opportunity has scored some successes. The Government decided to inscribe it in the Constitution, as it did with the priority goals set for education. Legislation has been adopted in order to ensure a real presence of women in political representation. Mandatory parity on voting lists and in the membership of executive bodies was recently accepted. A campaign and legislation against sexual harassment, primarily in the workplace, have complemented the provisions aimed at eliminating discrimination at work.

Our social security model has evolved to take the gender dimension better into account. A far-reaching reform of the work week is currently under discussion in Belgium, which would allow women and men better to organize their work and personal lives. In brief, Belgium is changing, reflecting a willingness to integrate the Beijing objectives.

Of course, we must do more. Indeed, there is no sphere in which this "equality reflex" is irrelevant: social, educational and training policies; employment policies; economic policy; health; development cooperation; migration policy; or such issues as the settlement of armed conflict, trafficking in people and refugee policy. Thus, we cannot continue to denounce violence against women while we turn away when they seek refuge from it in our homes.

The struggle against injustice perpetrated against women because they are women will make no further progress without an ongoing dialogue between public authorities and civil society. I wish to welcome the action of the non-governmental organizations, not only for their work to implement these objectives, but also for often indicating the road to be taken. The organization of the world march against poverty and violence against women was a concrete and symbolic expression of this. I welcome the role played by Belgian organizations in this demonstration, as well as in all of the exchanges held in the framework of our meeting. I also wish to stress the important role of the labour partners in drafting policies on equality and in the successful follow-up of those policies.

We increasingly feel the need to set our sights on more global objectives — major development objectives that would allow each country to adapt and to make progress on the basis of its own realities. As a result, Belgium is convinced that normative instruments are crucial in order to promote legality in international relations.

As a guarantee of the fundamental rights and freedoms of women, Belgium attaches particular importance to the adoption and universal ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and its Protocol, as well as to the draft Protocol on Trafficking in Human Beings and in particular the draft Protocol on Trafficking in Women and Children, complementing the draft Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.

I should like also to stress the need to institute the International Criminal Court, which would help effectively to implement respect for women's rights, both universal and individual.

Finally, I believe that it is crucial to apply international labour standards to all forms of labour, in particular those which affect women.

It is not easy to reach a conclusion on such a topic. On behalf of Belgium, I will do so by highlighting three priorities. The first priority is the development of international cooperation. We must — and here I am speaking of my country as well — manage to allocate at least 0.7 per cent of our gross national product to development cooperation. This is an obligation that we can no longer ignore. We must work tirelessly to eradicate poverty and to invest in literacy and education.

The second priority must be the adoption of national and international legislation to combat violence against women, in particular the struggle against certain traditional practices that physically harm women and girls.

Finally, in every forum where it has a voice, Belgium will demand that rights in the area of sexuality, such as reproductive rights, be considered an integral part of human rights. This is truly a keystone of human rights.

The President: I give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Lidia Gutu, Deputy Prime Minister of Moldova.

Mrs. Gutu (Moldova) *(spoke in Romanian; English text furnished by the delegation)*: Let me first take this opportunity to join other delegations in

congratulating you, Sir, on your election to the presidency of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. I am convinced that your skills and your experience will contribute to the success of this session.

It is a great honour for me to participate in this special session. I believe this review offers an excellent framework for evaluating the gender perspective throughout the global system.

The decisions taken at the Beijing Conference have had a decisive impact on promoting the status of women. Since 1995, Member States have tried, through the integrated and balanced approach of the Beijing Platform for Action, to implement and promote programme measures for development and for the equality of women in the world.

Though we have registered substantial progress in some areas of gender equality, there is still the challenge of developing and implementing effective gender-sensitive strategies and methods so as to achieve the objectives of the Platform for Action. In relation to the commitments in the Platform and its critical areas, a review and appraisal of obstacles should be conducted at the national, regional and international levels. This should involve examining the actions taken and the results obtained, as is indicated in the report of the Secretary-General.

The Republic of Moldova believes that the best way of achieving gender equality in the twenty-first century is to ensure that future initiatives are based on best practices and lessons learned from the review and appraisal process. The principles underlying the Beijing Declaration, the Platform for Action and the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women constitute a valuable framework for action to offer women and men equal opportunities to participate in social, economic and political life.

With a view to implementing the Beijing Platform for Action, the Government of the Republic of Moldova has adopted a National Plan containing urgent measures to improve the status of women. We have set up specialized committees within the presidency and the Parliament to improve the status of women. Within the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, we have created a Department for Family Matters and Equal Opportunities, a specialized structure to implement State policy on promoting social equality for women. We have also created gender units within the ministries. As a result, the number of women holding positions in our State has increased fivefold in the last five years. The number of members of Parliament who are women has increased from 4.5 per cent to 9 per cent.

Through close cooperation between our Government, the specialized agencies of the United Nations system — the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Development Fund for Women and the United Nations Children's Fund — and other international organizations, as well as various non-governmental organizations, we have developed and are now implementing projects to improve the status of women and children and on health protection and reproductive rights.

Like other delegations, we believe that promoting human rights and the international legal instruments in this field has an important complementary impact on the development of gender equality as set forth in the Beijing Platform for Action. From this standpoint, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, to which the Republic of Moldova is a party, is one of the most important legal instruments as regards the protection of women's rights.

Accordingly, the Government of the Republic of Moldova reaffirms its strong commitment to promoting gender equality and consolidating the status of women at the national level, within the context of promoting basic human rights.

Following the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, the Republic of Moldova focused its efforts on developing long-term measures with a view to implementing strategies on creating internal legislative and normative frameworks for ensuring equal rights and opportunities for women and men.

Harmonization of the internal judicial system in the Republic of Moldova with international legal norms and instruments is an essential stage as we move to improve the status of women.

Today my country, like other countries with economies in transition, is undergoing radical structural changes. It is obvious that the vulnerable segments of our society, especially women, need increased social protection during this period of transition. In this context, I should like to point out that

the limited financial and economic resources of the Republic of Moldova have diminished the ability of State institutions to reach, over the medium term, the objectives set out in the National Plan for protection of women.

At the same time, some aspects of globalization and the financial crisis that has affected my country's economy have led to the emergence of new obstacles in the process of economic development, causing a negative impact on the status of women and increasing what has been called the feminization of poverty. Unemployment has increased considerably, and, unfortunately, 68 per cent of the labour market's unemployed are women.

Violence against women, prostitution and the precarious health conditions among women constitute other problems we face and for which we are seeking efficient solutions.

Although lately the Government has undertaken a series of measures at the national level to improve health protection, at present we have a high rate of maternal and infant mortality, and the level of medical assistance provided in rural areas, including to pregnant women, and the rate of prevention of contagious diseases and HIV infection is still low. We also need to improve the training of medical staff specializing in reproductive health.

We are convinced that full implementation of the decisions adopted in 1995 at the World Conference on Women is possible only if declarations and political appeals are followed up by practical steps and the provision of real financial resources.

Our delegation greatly appreciates the importance attached by the Secretary-General and the specialized agencies of the United Nations to achieving the objectives of the Beijing World Conference and to the decisions to be adopted at this session.

As Governments have the primary responsibility for fully implementing the Beijing Platform for Action and further actions and initiatives contained in the final documents of this session of the General Assembly, I would like to reaffirm the Government of the Republic of Moldova's strong support in this regard.

The President: I now call on Ms. Mu Sochua, Minister for Women's and Veterans' Affairs of Cambodia.

Ms. Mu: It is a great honour for me to represent the Kingdom of Cambodia on this very important occasion. Cambodia is a country in the process of recovery after decades of war and the destruction of its social structures. The need for the inclusion and participation of the women of Cambodia in the development process is not merely one of political correctness; rather, it is a prerequisite for the country's economic and social regeneration, a fact of which the Royal Government is well aware, and it is dedicated to the implementation of change.

The Royal Government has taken steps to address the social and economic destruction caused by armed conflict and the emerging challenges of the introduction of free-market economy and globalization, which impinge on the lives of the women of Cambodia and on society in general.

A full-time female Minister of the Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs was appointed following the 1998 elections. *Neary Rattanak* — Women are Precious Gems — is a badge we all wear with pride, and is the name of a strategy, a five-year plan, launched in 1999 on International Women's Day, 8 March. It is to guide Ministry operations over the medium-term. The plan elaborates a nationwide effort to examine the status and rights of women and to devise the means to bring women into the decision-making process at all levels.

In applying the *Neary Rattanak* plan, the Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs has not only engaged in policy-making. We have also established clear strategies to mainstream gender and to ensure nationwide mechanisms to monitor the implementation of these strategies, with clear indicators and a checklist to measure the improvement of the status of women and the girl child in four main areas: education, reproductive health and HIV/AIDS, economic empowerment and legal protection.

In order to educate all citizens on the devastating social and economic consequences of trafficking in women and children, the Ministry recently launched a major national campaign for the prevention of all forms of trafficking in women and children. Further, the Ministry of the Interior, in order to improve the capacity of the police, judiciary and prosecutors, launched a programme on law enforcement against sexual exploitation and trafficking in children. Such capacity-building and educational campaigns are

expected to have a deep impact on societal values and the physical protection of girls and women in Cambodia.

Mr. Stanislaus (Grenada), Vice-President, took the Chair.

In addition, the Ministry of Education has prepared a National Action Plan for Girls' Education, aimed at raising educational attainment among girls. Within this framework, quality and efficiency improvements to basic education for girls will be complemented by support for adolescent girls to continue their basic education.

The key issue of the legal protection of women is now being addressed, in the context of setting up a National Council on Judicial Reform. It will be necessary to integrate gender issues from the earliest stages of development of the comprehensive judicial reform programme in order to establish mechanisms for effective legal protection for women. Other initiatives, such as promoting the recruitment of female officers among the police, appointing women judges, providing intensive training for legal professionals on women's legal rights and training in legal literacy for the general public on gender issues, are also planned.

The Royal Government attaches great importance to increasing women's access to quality health care and services. Since 1996, the Ministry of Health has undertaken far-reaching organizational and financial reforms to strengthen the health-care system, including the quality of and access to services for women and girls. HIV/AIDS has been recognized as a major threat to women. In 1999, a policy on women, the girl child and HIV/AIDS was developed to address this growing concern.

With regard to civil society, the social inclusion of women has been addressed by the Royal Government through the active encouragement and participation of women in the planning and management of local development through elected village and commune development committees. Forty per cent of the members of these local development committees are women. This commitment to the inclusion of women in decision-making processes was evident in the large participation of women in the 1998 national election and the entry of 14 women members — an increase from 5 — into the National Assembly.

In my brief statement today, I have summarized the most significant developments with regard to the advancement of women in Cambodia, in line with the Beijing Platform for Action. However, much remains to be done, a fact acknowledged by the Royal Government. My Government is committed to continuing to address these issues. Although the commitment is in place, Cambodia still requires substantial external financial support and solidarity to attain its goals.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Bruce Mariama Aribot, Minister for Social Affairs, Advancement of Women and Childhood of Guinea.

Ms. Aribot (Guinea) (*spoke in French*): I wish at the outset to convey to Mr. Theo Ben Gurirab the congratulations of the delegation of Guinea on his election to the presidency of the General Assembly at this special session. I wish also to congratulate the other members of the Bureau, whose assistance we believe will enable the President successfully to discharge his important responsibilities.

My delegation thanks and congratulates Ms. Christine Kapalata, Chairman of the Preparatory Committee for this special session, and the other Committee officers for the sense of responsibility they evinced throughout the preparatory work. We are most grateful too to the Secretariat for its fine reports and for the practical arrangements made for the special session.

On behalf of my head of State, His Excellency General Lansana Conté, and on behalf of the Government of Guinea, I thank the Secretary-General for his initiative to convene, at Headquarters, this special session to appraise the level of commitment by Governments and the international community with respect to gender equality and to assess progress since the adoption of the Beijing Programme for Action.

As other speakers have indicated, and as noted in the various reports before us, the international community has made major efforts genuinely to implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. While welcoming the success that has been achieved in some areas, we are obliged to say that further effort needs to be made, as indicated by the Secretary-General in his statement at this session.

In the Republic of Guinea, the Beijing Platform for Action is being implemented through strategic guidelines set out in the policy document on the advancement of women 1997-2001, adopted by the Government in December 1996, and spelled out in a framework programme for gender and development. This is a cross-cutting and trans-sectoral programme focused on five major objectives: gender, law and empowerment; gender, economy and the fight against poverty; gender, education and training; gender, health and population; and strengthening the institutional machinery.

In close cooperation with non-governmental organizations, trade unions, civil society and our development partners, the Government of Guinea is working to implement the framework programme for gender and development. That active partnership has led to a number of successes: establishment of a system for informing women of their rights through an increased number of legal aid centres with increased financial, material and human resources; repeal of some legal provisions that discriminated against women; formulation of sectoral development policies with a direct impact on the socio-economic advancement of women; adoption of five framework development programmes, three of them concerned with the eradication of poverty and affecting the status of women; adoption of special measures for easier access by women to resources with a view to becoming more independent; formation of a committee on equality to promote the education of girls; reduction of the illiteracy rate and of disparities between girls and boys in access to education and other training; implementation of programmes to fight HIV/AIDS and of a population and reproductive health project to bolster the achievements of our family planning programme and to support safe motherhood; and defining a framework for cooperation with our development partners.

Despite those successes, we still face obstacles, including low levels of education; a lack of women in decision-making positions; problems in the areas of reproductive health and family planning; a lack of resources, proper mechanisms and microfinancing initiatives for women's projects; the impact of war and armed conflict along our borders; and the AIDS pandemic.

To expedite implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, we must therefore do the following: overcome financial, institutional and human problems; achieve true decentralization and closer cooperation between public institutions and civil society in Guinea; get women more involved in formulating development policy, in decision-making and in implementing national policies, programmes and projects; improve our system for the collection, processing and management of statistical data; and further strengthen partnerships with the various actors on the ground, especially non-governmental organizations. Clearly, the road ahead is long and arduous, so we stress that the advancement of women must be an integral part of overall development programmes.

We wish to emphasize the importance of involving women in the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts, especially in our subregion, West Africa. For more than a decade, our country, the Republic of Guinea, has been surrounded by hotbeds of tension, including civil wars in Liberia, Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone. Cruel emergency situations resulting from armed conflict have caused massive shifts of people into our country. Following the crises in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau, our country has seen an unprecedented population explosion with the arrival of more than 800,000 refugees, 60 per cent of them women and children. Guinea is thus host to the largest number of refugees per capita in Africa: refugees today account for 10 per cent of the population of Guinea.

That situation has had an impact on our country's basic social infrastructure, on the functioning of our institutions and on the life of Guineans. Our country's involvement in the settlement of these conflicts has had a negative effect on development programmes, particularly those focusing on women and children. Since 1989, my country has budgeted more than $300 million for the restoration of peace, security and stability in West Africa.

The women of Guinea understand this and, through a variety of organizations, have been mobilizing to make their voices heard and to participate in the future of our country. At Conakry, in January 2000, the Network of Guinean Women, Ministers and Parliamentarians held a subregional conference of West African countries on the prevention and resolution of conflicts. Guinean women have also played an active role in meetings of women of the Mano River Union on resolving the conflict in Sierra

Leone and on possible intervention to prevent other conflicts.

I should like to take this opportunity to appeal to the international community to support my country's development programmes as well as our efforts to restore peace and security to West Africa.

I cannot conclude without extending my sincere gratitude to the international donor community for its support for the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in our country. We hope that by the year 2005, we will have successfully implemented the forward-looking strategies of Nairobi.

The Acting President: Before giving the floor to the next speaker, may I remind delegates that the time limit for statements at this session is seven minutes.

I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Gloria Valerín, Minister for the Status of Women of Costa Rica.

Mrs. Valerín (Costa Rica) (*spoke in Spanish*): Five years ago, humankind took a firm and resolute step in the search for equity and equality between men and women by approving the Beijing Platform for Action. That step had historic global repercussions at both the international and the local level, where undeniable progress has been achieved.

At the international level, the Beijing Platform built a bridge between grand statements of principle and the development of concrete plans to achieve gender equity. Nationally, countries have moved beyond isolated, short-term and disjointed actions in favour of public policies with a gender focus. Such is the case in my country, Costa Rica.

Our achievements in developing public policies for gender equality in areas such as poverty, work, credit, health, adolescence, violence and political participation have become well known since Beijing. We are proud of having developed a national policy whose aim is to promote equal opportunities for girls, pregnant teenagers and mothers, and to guarantee the rights of minors.

The very serious problem of violence against women has warranted particular attention in our country. As a result, we have created a national system for monitoring and preventing family violence, which has yielded excellent results at both the inter-institutional and the inter-sectoral level.

Costa Rica's democracy is being broadened and improved through the political participation of women; at the same time, it provides indispensable support for maintaining and strengthening all of the victories achieved by women. Our electoral code has been reformed so as to ensure the participation of at least 40 per cent of women. Furthermore, we have ensured that the Supreme Electoral Tribunal will also apply this 40 per cent requirement to elective positions within parties in the local and legislative elections. Hence, with the elections in 2002, we will double the number of women in local government and in Congress.

The National Mechanism for Women has been in existence in my country for 25 years. I should therefore like to highlight the fact that it was the progressive and sustained impetus provided by the guidelines of Beijing that led to its transformation in 1998 into the National Institute for Women. The leading role and high-level influence of this high-ranking, modern organization has been strengthened by the designation of a Minister for Women's Affairs.

The State of Costa Rica has reaffirmed and strengthened its obligation to guarantee equal rights for men and women since 1990 through the law to promote the social equality of women. The progress achieved since then has made it possible for us to have a broad and coherent legal framework in order to support our gender-equality activities. In the past five years, we have succeeded in enacting important legal instruments. Among these, I should like to highlight legislation on domestic violence, sexual harassment and disability; laws against the sexual exploitation of children; a legal code for minors and adolescents; regulations relating to women living in poverty; laws to ensure special protection for pregnant women and nursing mothers; and, more generally, laws to ensure the rights of women to full health throughout their entire lives.

Costa Rica is standing by the commitment made by President Rodríguez to protect life from the time of conception and to oppose abortion, in keeping with our political Constitution and the culture of our people. Furthermore, the decisions of the constitutional court have clarified and reaffirmed the duty of institutions and of government to orient their actions and policies towards equality and gender equity.

A good example of the progress made in Costa Rica with regard to legal instruments for equality and

women's rights can be seen in the fact that we were one of the first countries to sign the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

The Republic's four branches of power participate to promote initiatives to advance gender equity: the recently created Special Standing Committee on Women of the Legislative Assembly; the People's Defender; the Ministerial and Municipal Departments for Women; and the Supreme Elections Tribunal and Committee on Family Violence of the Judiciary. Together with the National Institute of Women — the national mechanism — they constitute a set of bodies and competencies that coordinate efforts towards a common purpose.

It has not been easy, and it will not be easy in the future, to transform conditions for women or to overcome the disadvantages from which they suffer. We have started out on the long road, learning important lessons along the way, and I would like to highlight three of them.

We have learned that gender equity actions should not be limited to the national mechanism or to practical assistance. They must be part of a comprehensive public policy, involving all the areas within the competence of the State.

We have learned that it is imperative to develop institutional and budgetary capacities in order to guarantee the incorporation of a gender focus into all affairs of State and to ensure its application.

We have learned that transparent and respectful opportunities for debate and dialogue with the women's movement and civil society can ensure the sustainability of public policies that promote equality. From the lessons that we have learned over the past few years, we can look towards the future and see clearly the major challenges that lie ahead.

We must improve our information systems so as to make gender inequality and women's contribution to development clearer and more visible; to monitor the impact of public policies and legal progress; and to ensure that we are accountable to society, as we must be in a mature democracy.

We have to guarantee the full political participation of women in the highest decision-making spheres. This means that at the same time we have to create national mechanisms that allow access to those spheres and strengthen women's leadership capabilities. We have to help women have access to more and better employment opportunities. Despite the country's higher rate of school attendance for women than for men, there is still gender segmentation in professional and technical training. We want to promote the entry of women into the fields of science, technology and the arts.

One of the most pressing and difficult goals is to free women from the social and cultural constraints that assign to them the full responsibility for domestic and reproductive tasks. We have to stress medium- and long-term policies in order to overcome these constraints.

In summing up, I can affirm with certainty that in my country the theme of women is today a Government policy that has to be transformed into State policies. The commitment of all institutions of the State of Costa Rica in the systematic implementation of public policies with a gender focus, with a sense of process and a vision of the future, is just beginning.

Public policies for equality and gender equity will take on their full meaning when we succeed in giving the lives of women and men in our country the highest levels of quality, when their lives are longer, healthier, more productive and, above all, more pleasant and happier. That is why today, as yesterday, women in Costa Rica still want bread and roses.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Onechanh Thammavong, Vice-President of the National Assembly of the Lao People's Democratic Republic and President of the Lao Women's Union.

Mrs. Thammavong (Lao People's Democratic Republic) (*spoke in Lao; English text provided by delegation*): It is indeed my great pleasure and honour to represent the Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic at this twenty-third special session of the General Assembly on "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century". Let me start by congratulating the President on his election to lead this important special session.

Since the Beijing World Conference on Women, the Party and the Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic have attached great importance to implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in

the 12 areas of concern. I would like to take this opportunity to present to this Assembly our achievements, the obstacles we have encountered and our future plan of action to promote the advancement and development of Lao women of all ethnic groups.

The Lao Women's Union is the national mechanism for the promotion of equal rights and the advancement of women. The Union has responsibility for overseeing, directly and indirectly, implementation of all the Government's policies and programmes relating to women's development and gender issues.

After five years of implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, the results can be summarized as follows. In the field of poverty eradication, Lao women have developed their knowledge and abilities in planning, management, capital control and broad access to financial institutions. They are active in seeking credit and arranging credit groups in the banks and solving problems in many different spheres. In this way, their lives become better and more successful.

The health-care sector has been improved, the maternal and child mortality rates have decreased and the quality of life of mothers and children has gradually been enhanced. The Lao Women's Union and the Anti-AIDS National Committee have conducted training courses and have disseminated knowledge relating to the prevention of HIV/AIDS.

In May 1999, the Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic adopted the Population Development Policy, which emphasizes the importance and the needs of promoting the role and status of Lao women in the development process.

Lao women have become aware of their rights and obligations and are now better able than before to protect their rights and interests. Female victims are protected by laws, gender issues have been gradually recognized by society, and there are now more women in the judiciary — in the prosecutor's office, in the courts, among the judges and among the police.

The Lao Government and people have been the victims of war in the past, and this still continues to affect the life of the Lao people, especially women and children. The Lao Government therefore considers the creation of a peaceful environment crucial for the national social and economic development that would bring prosperity to Lao people of all ethnic groups.

The Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic provides assistance to the victims of war and of unexploded ordnance. Today our country has political stability, and the people have better opportunities for social and economic progress.

Lao women of all ethnic groups, in both urban and rural areas, have developed and upgraded their knowledge of how to protect the rights of women and children, gender issues and the application of new techniques in production, nutrition, health, education and increasing family income in order to improve their quality of life. Accordingly, the number of women entrepreneurs has increased in the business of national and international trade.

On the issue of violence against women, the Lao People's Democratic Republic has undertaken various activities in order to eliminate it, such as the following: comprehensive measures to improve and disseminate penal laws in order to reduce and eliminate violence against women, by organizing training programmes, disseminating knowledge about laws to the public and creating legal counselling offices; eliminating trafficking of women and children, fighting against prostitution and providing assistance to the victims of violence; and research into the causes of violence against women, as well as effective measures to prevent it.

At all levels, the number of female leaders has increased. For example, in the National Assembly, the percentage of female parliamentarians has risen from 9.4 per cent in 1992 to 21.2 per cent today. One woman has been elected Vice-President of the National Assembly, two are members of the Standing Committee and one is the president of the National Assembly Commission for ethnic affairs. In the Government Cabinet, two women have been appointed Vice-Ministers. Apart from this, one provincial governor and two chiefs of districts are women. This demonstrates the growing participation of women in political affairs.

The implementation of these activities has brought us multifaceted successes. However, the advancement and development of women have been thwarted by such obstacles as outdated traditions and conservative ideas. These are the main obstacles to progress for women. The issue of equal rights for women and men has not been addressed appropriately. There is a lack of highly qualified and competent women personnel. Moreover, budgetary resources for

women's development are inadequate, while transportation between rural and urban areas is still limited.

In line with our renovation policy and the Beijing Platform for Action, the Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic is committed to systematic advancement and development for Lao women of all ethnic groups. In this regard, the Lao Government has approved a Lao women's development plan, which comprises four major programmes: promoting women's participation in economic development and poverty alleviation for Lao women; institutional strengthening and capacity-building programmes for the Lao Women's Union; promoting the advancement and protecting the legitimate rights and benefits of women and children; and improving the knowledge of Lao women about government and party policies and our national cultural heritage.

The Lao Women's Union has a major strategic responsibility for achieving the long-term human resource development goals of the Lao People's Democratic Republic and for enhancing the participation of Lao women at all levels of societal development, in particular at the grass roots level.

The main responsibility for implementing the Beijing Platform for Action lies with national Governments. However, in this undertaking, the developing countries, especially the least developed, are not in a position to fulfil this responsibility on their own. The international community has the duty to cooperate with and assist them in their efforts to achieve the objectives set forth in the Platform.

In conclusion, once again may I thank you, Sir, for giving me this opportunity to speak and to share our experiences in this meeting. Let me wish this special session a successful completion.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency The Honourable Aisha Ismail, Minister for Women's Affairs and Youth Development of Nigeria.

Ms. Ismail (Nigeria): The Group of 77 and China, on whose behalf I am addressing this special session of the General Assembly, is indeed pleased to see Mr. Gurirab preside over this historic session on "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century". With his wealth of experience and the outstanding leadership he has demonstrated over the years, particularly since the commencement of the fifty-fourth session of the General Assembly, the Group is confident that this historic special session of the General Assembly will be crowned with success.

Five years ago, at the Fourth World Conference on Women in China, representatives from 189 countries adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. That was a demonstration of a reaffirmed international commitment to the goals of equality, development and peace for all women of the world. It represented a concerted effort to advance the global, regional and national agendas for the empowerment of women. This review conference presents us with an opportunity to share experiences and to identify areas of progress and challenges confronting us in the struggle for women's empowerment and gender equality.

For us in the developing countries, the implementation of the Platform for Action in practically all the critical areas of concern has been a remarkable experience. While progress has been recorded in certain areas, there have been difficulties in others. Let me, therefore, begin with a brief remark on our efforts.

For developing countries today, the quest for poverty eradication and improved education and health for women and girls remains a top priority. In pursuit of these goals, developing countries have reviewed and strengthened policies and programmes with a special focus on the needs of women.

The issue of violence against women has also received and continues to receive a lot of attention in many developing countries. There have been policy, legal and institutional reforms to tackle all forms of violence against women. The adoption of the optional protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women by the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session is a landmark achievement. This will further enhance the promotion and protection of the human rights of women. In addition, there has been an increase in the participation and representation of women at the decision-making and political levels.

The implementation of the Platform for Action has facilitated gender mainstreaming policies and programmes at the national, regional and international levels. These various initiatives contribute to the

achievement of the goals of gender equality, peace and development.

Despite these achievements, it is imperative for us to recognize that our destination is still considerably far away, for not only have new challenges emerged, but old obstacles still persist. Since Beijing, the world has witnessed a lot of radical transformations in the area of computer and information technology, and one word that captures that transformation is "globalization". Indeed, globalization has reduced the world to a global village, facilitating the rapid transfer of knowledge and massive cross-cultural interaction among people and broadening people's minds, thus creating a heterogeneous global community. Undoubtedly, globalization has opened up opportunities for the creation of more wealth and the improvement of social life in some parts of the world.

While the benefits of globalization have been recognized, the reality is that developing countries have been at a disadvantage. More importantly, however, for this session it is important to acknowledge that the negative impact of globalization is felt more by the women of the developing countries. It is therefore necessary to critically examine how the issue of globalization is impacting the empowerment of women in that world to enable the development of appropriate programmes and to harness the opportunities presented by this new trend.

In this connection, however, there is a need for the international community to recognize the basic fact that it is the inherent weakness of the economies and institutional structures of many developing countries that make it extremely difficult for them to cope with the forces of globalization. This inadequacy hampers the effective implementation of programmes and projects for the advancement of women in these societies. This makes it imperative for the international community to support their efforts at the national level to meet the challenges of a globalized economy. We must similarly act to strengthen international cooperation for development by ensuring the creation of an appropriate international environment supportive of sustainable and equitable growth for developing countries. This will facilitate and promote the effective implementation of the Platform for Action in general and the critical areas of concern in particular.

Further impediments to the global commitment to gender equality are the debt burden and the painful implementation of structural adjustment programmes, which hang like millstones around the necks of many countries in the developing world. In spite of the willingness and cooperation of some countries of the developed world to relieve or cancel bilateral debt through such initiatives such as the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Debt Initiative, the debt burden of the developing world, particularly in Africa, remains very high.

Financial flows have been virtually at a standstill in recent years and the financial distress of individual countries has been further aggravated by stagnant export earnings as commodity prices continue to fall. As a result, most indebted countries are unable to fulfil commitments on their debt payments and debt servicing continues to cripple the economies of the indebted countries and to impoverish their people, disproportionately more so the women and their families.

Debt cancellation can release much-needed vital resources and enable developing countries to commence the process of rehabilitating the destroyed social sector. Freedom from the debt burden will provide the means to help provide basic social services to the people. In addition, most developing countries carry the burden of a weak health sector, characterized by inadequate services. This is due, among other things, to a low capacity for adequate investment in health care in general. The total budget of developing countries in the health sector is not equal to 10 per cent of the overall budget of one developed country. Given this situation, developing countries not only have to cope with killer diseases such as malaria, typhoid, cholera and others that still ravage our population, but also have been devastated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This crisis is threatening to reverse our modest gains in the field of human resources development. Certainly, in the face of such a grim situation, debt cancellation at this point in time becomes the right of the poor, so that vital resources can be released to redress a critical situation in a critical area of human survival.

In the overall struggle for gender equality and the advancement of women, we must acknowledge the contributions of, and pay tribute to, the numerous non-governmental organizations and civil society groups around the world. They have played a prominent role as one of the formidable driving forces behind the struggle for gender equality and the advancement of women. They have also been

instrumental in moving the continuing debates on gender, development and peace to the top of the agenda at the national and international levels. Their untiring efforts in making information available, changing individual attitudes and setting the agenda for public dialogue have been crucial to integrating women's issues into the mainstream of the development discourse. These organizations have truly empowered people to effect changes in their lives. The challenge before us is to continue to expand and strengthen the cooperative links with civil society to advance the status of women.

We are united against the horrendous crime of trafficking in women and children, which today is universally acknowledged as a crime against humanity. We are united in our abhorrence of conflicts that target women and children. We are also committed to justice for women and for all, at the national, regional and international levels.

In conclusion, let me, on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, reiterate that we remain committed to implementing the Platform for Action. We will continue to advance the agenda to which the world is committed. We therefore look forward to the adoption at this special session of further strategic initiatives to advance gender equality and promote justice, development and peace in the new millennium.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Christopher Matumbike, Vice-Minister of National Affairs, Employment Creation and Cooperatives of Zimbabwe.

Mr. Matumbike (Zimbabwe): Allow me to associate my delegation with the congratulations already addressed to Mr. Theo-Ben Gurirab upon his election to the demanding post of the presidency of the Beijing + 5 review conference. In view of his wealth of experience, we hope to work fruitfully and successfully under his guidance in search of mutually acceptable decisions on the complex issues of gender equality, development and peace. Needless to say, he can count on the Zimbabwe delegation for support in discharging his duties. We fervently hope that this conference, besides enlightening and creating awareness among the misinformed, will also provide information on the progress made so far by various countries in their endeavours to implement the Beijing Platform for Action.

Indeed, this theme has attracted significant attention and given rise to discourse in various forums at the national, subregional, regional and international levels. It is pleasing to note that today we are gathered here to take stock of achievements in the area of gender equality and development.

Like most other countries, Zimbabwe acknowledges that any meaningful development is unlikely as long as gender inequalities are not addressed. The lack of equal access to natural resources and opportunities negatively affects the social and economic development of women.

I now wish to draw the Assembly's attention to the Beijing Platform for Action, agreed upon at the Fourth World Conference on Women, and the subsequent plans of action drawn up by Governments. Zimbabwe has drawn up comprehensive programmes to address the critical areas of concern as identified at Beijing. Zimbabwe, in partnership with civic and other non-governmental organizations, recognized the need for this partnership to ensure sustainable development and the attainment of gender equality. While Zimbabwe has registered significant achievements, it has not yet overcome the barriers standing in the way of attaining gender equality. However, great strides have been made through the improvement of legal instruments in most sectors affecting the female gender.

Agriculture is the backbone of Zimbabwe's economy, contributing about 17 per cent of the gross domestic product. Women constitute about 51 per cent of the population of Zimbabwe, of which about 86 per cent live in the rural areas. It is estimated that women account for 70 per cent of the agricultural labour force in Zimbabwe. Female-headed households make up the majority of the rural poor. Improving conditions in the rural areas through redistribution of land and ownership of land by women will go a long way towards poverty alleviation, thereby creating a better and healthier nation while addressing principles of equality. The current Land Reform and Resettlement Phase II policy framework of 1998 identifies the objective of the programme as the resettlement of families in a gender-sensitive manner.

The resettlement programme has been and will continue to be implemented through various resettlement models. Among the constraints women face in Zimbabwe is limited access to technology

skills, credit, information skills and other supportive requisites, as well as economic disabilities.

Most development programmes have made a few strides in recognizing women in their own right with regard to land redistribution, agricultural training and access to credit. However, in order for women to have full recognition there is a need for increased efforts in lobbying and for their participation in all economic reform programmes. What is important to note is the fact that women are eligible for agricultural land schemes in the same manner as their male counterparts.

The Government of Zimbabwe is making efforts to ensure that land is distributed equally and fairly to all those in need of it. Land is money, and money is land. Therefore, poverty eradication among women can be achieved only if resources are shared equally, to the benefit of women. Women's access to land will grossly improve their economic empowerment, which is globally a critical area for women.

The Poverty Alleviation Programme has also been introduced to eradicate poverty and directly support and sustain livelihood initiatives in disadvantaged communities, focusing on women and other vulnerable groups. It also emphasizes employment creation and self-reliance programmes.

In spite of the fact that access to credit is one of the key elements that empower women and enable them to take advantage of economic responsibilities, credit institutions rarely lend to women since women do not have collateral. In an effort to overcome this problem, women in Zimbabwe have mobilized to form saving clubs, credit cooperatives and village banks governed by the communities themselves. This is one way of ensuring that appropriate decisions are made for communities. Efforts are under way towards the establishment of a women's bank through the mobilization of funds to boost the capital base of the project.

In an effort to strengthen the national machinery and ensure effective contributions to the Plan of Action, the Government of Zimbabwe recognized that there was the need for a strong mechanism, as well as the need to popularize the global Platform for Action. With this realization, the Government of Zimbabwe embarked on a process of strengthening the institutional mechanism through the establishment and formulation of the gender focal points in coordination with ministries and departments in Zimbabwe.

It has made great strides in fostering the formal education system, particularly at the primary and secondary levels. What has not been adequately addressed are the efforts to change the attitudinal and cultural factors which discriminate against the girl child and women, in the context of which attempts to foster the education system are taking place. More attention is being directed at addressing negative contextual factors, such as the socialization process of the girl child and negative attitudes towards the girl child at home, in the community and at school.

While there has been marked improvement in retention rates in primary schools, there are glaring gender disparities in secondary and tertiary education. Notwithstanding these gender disparities, Zimbabwe has improved in terms of retention figures for girls at all levels of the education system as a result of the affirmative action programmes put in place, particularly in tertiary education.

The Government of Zimbabwe has put in place a gender curriculum that favours the girl child and includes technical subjects such as carpentry. The United Nations Children's Fund and the Canadian International Development Agency are the main sponsors of this project. The long-term goal of this project is to create an enabling environment for the girl child's equitable access to participation and achievement in education. The project focuses on changing the attitudes, values and perceptions of a variety of stakeholders who play a role in the girl child's education.

The subject of women and health is a priority for the Government of Zimbabwe. The Government recognizes that good health is fundamental to a fulfilling life, and it is committed to ensuring that women have access to a high standard of appropriate, affordable and effective health-care services with an emphasis on preventive care and the promotion of healthy lifestyles. Tremendous strides have been made in the extension of health-care programmes and facilities to women in both the urban and rural areas. However, in recent years these achievements have come under increased pressure due to the realities of financial austerity and inflation, expanding population and illness related to HIV/AIDS.

While the concurrent crises of AIDS and the economic decline are critical challenges, it is important to keep achievements in mind. Successful primary

health care reduced the infant mortality rate from 100 to 50 between 1980 and 1988, and the reduction continued into the 1990s.

The country has made tremendous progress in the area of the mortality rate; it fell from 60 per cent in 1994 to 42 per cent in 1997. At present, one in every three women uses modern birth control; this is one of the highest rates of contraceptive practice in Africa. This allows women to control their own fertility has contributed to dramatically reduced infant mortality rates. It is important to note that 90 per cent of pregnant women receive antenatal care, three quarters of it provided by trained personnel. According to the 1999 annual benchmark report, the prenatal mortality rate is on the decline: it was 43.8 in 1996, 41.4 in 1997 and 40.1 in 1998. Eighty-five per cent of the population is located within eight kilometres of a health facility, and ratio of population to facility is around 8,000 to 1.

In comparative terms, health remains a priority of the Government in terms of public expenditure. The year 2000 is seeing a decline in the health budget, but this has been cushioned by the introduction of the AIDS levy. The HIV/AIDS infection rate has reached a level that affects the morbidity, mortality and demographic profile. In 1998, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS estimated that 25.8 per cent of people in the country aged between 15 and 49 were infected. The impact of this on women's health cannot be underestimated. AIDS is responsible for the highest proportion of the national burden of disease. A 1999 report indicated that HIV-related diseases may account for as much as 40 per cent of Zimbabwe's national health burden. As a result, adult mortality has increased markedly.

While the Government of Zimbabwe is fully committed to promoting gender equality, the prevailing macro-economic situation has had a negative impact on the efforts that are being made. The Government of Zimbabwe has been forced to work with limited human and financial resources, making it difficult to efficiently and effectively implement the Platform for Action.

The Acting President: Let me once again remind members that speakers' time is limited to seven minutes.

I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Andrée Lahoud, Chairperson of the delegation of Lebanon.

Mrs. Lahoud (Lebanon) (*spoke in French*): I would like at the outset to thank the Secretary-General for his interest in the convening of this special session, the major focus of which is the development of mankind and society in the twenty-first century. There are three challenges us facing our modern society: growth, so that every individual may live in dignity; sharing, to eliminate inequity; and development, including the development of intelligence, freedom and knowledge.

The roots of underdevelopment are not solely economic; they are also cultural and political. Great segments of our populations are illiterate and have no access to education. Humans oppress other humans for economic, political, religious and racial reasons. The gap between rich and poor countries is widening, and the situation of the latter is now disastrous. The gap is exacerbated by inequality between men and women.

We cannot and must not be apathetic in the face of this situation. We must address the core of the problem; we must change our attitudes, our behaviour and our policies. Our response to pervasive underdevelopment must involve solidarity: that is the true path to the development that is key to peace among nations. The international community understands this, as we can see from the growing number of private organizations founded in recent years. Some of these are global in scope, and almost all respond with great care and laudable objectivity to international events.

But solidarity can yield results only if we all acknowledge the need for equality, justice and freedom. Women have a paramount part to play in social and political life. Men and women have different, equal and complementary natures and abilities; hence, we cannot build a good society without the active participation of women.

Against that background, Lebanon's National Commission on Women has prepared a plan of action in the context of our overall State strategy aimed at ensuring equality before the law for women and men, and at enhancing women's role in all of our development programmes. Lebanese law guarantees women's rights, but it is applied somewhat unequally,

depending on the woman's environment and level of education.

Lebanese women have suffered enormously from decades of Israeli aggression, occupation and war. Mothers have lost children, wives their husbands; some widows, invalids, prisoners and displaced persons have had to care for their families alone, and many have, of course, been obliged to abandon their studies. That has affected every part of Lebanon; the enormity of the exodus has left a trail of death and destruction throughout the country. Lebanese women have been actively involved in liberating the occupied territory. Now they must make an even greater effort to rebuild our country so that the wounds of war may be healed.

To that end, our National Commission and a number of non-governmental organizations are organizing campaigns for the education of girls and women with respect to playing an active role. But the needs are enormous.

But the needs are great. That is why, in conclusion, I would like to draw the attention of the Assembly to the disastrous and wretched situation of the people in southern Lebanon, now that it has been released from the Israeli yoke. Our villages have been destroyed; there are no longer any water; there are no longer any roads, electricity, industry or agriculture. Most of those returning home have found their homes destroyed. I appeal to the conscience of the people of the world so that they will organize, as soon as possible, considerable and prompt assistance to ensure, that the suffering in southern Lebanon does not lead us into further war and disaster.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Rashid Alimov, Chairman of the delegation of Tajikistan.

Mr. Alimov (Tajikistan) (*spoke in Russian*): The delegation of the Republic of Tajikistan fully shares the assessment, expressed here in this General Assembly Hall, that the twenty-third special session — the culmination of an enormous amount of work to analyse and implement the Beijing Platform for Action — is our common response to the new challenges of today as we demonstrate our single will and full resolve to find the most effective way of ensuring that women can live in dignity and enjoy an improved social and economic status in the twenty-first century.

Of course, this is no easy task. It is a long-term endeavour that means overcoming current obstacles and requires enormous political will. Clearly, the task is complicated by fundamental changes occurring in the world today, including globalization. In the five years since Beijing, the world has been unable to respond adequately to the new challenges posed by civil wars, inter-ethnic conflicts, international terrorism, organized crime, drug and arms trafficking, the AIDS epidemic and other dangerous infectious diseases. The saddest fact is that we have not been able to find a way of resolving the problem of poverty, which, overall is still increasing rather than decreasing. All of these horrible phenomena taking place today affect millions of women throughout the world and constitute an additional burden on their already fragile shoulders.

Tajikistan has suffered the horrors of civil war and is still suffering from problems associated with it. The five-year-long inter-Tajik conflict has brought untold suffering and damage to the economy and to society. The damage has been estimated at $7 billion. This is a serious blow to our national economy and to Tajik society. The key link in our societal chain — the family — has been affected, and the burden is being borne by the most vulnerable groups: women and children. There are 20,000 widows and 55,000 orphans in Tajikistan — the sad consequence of the fratricidal war. Just as we were beginning to move towards democracy and progress, the conflict set us back several years.

Today, there is a clear understanding within our society that a limit has been reached in political and social upheaval. With the signing of the General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan, we have put an end to a tragic chapter in the history of independent Tajikistan. Our young sovereign State has now arrived at a new, creative stage. With international support, our Government is taking steps to overcome the consequences of the civil war, and we are now reaping the first fruits of our effort at economic and social development. The restoration of peace and stability in Tajikistan has opened up new opportunities for enhancing the effectiveness of our social policy and making it more targeted and focused.

Despite the difficult financial and economic situation, our Government is trying to increase salaries, provide assistance to students and index pensions.

Significant resources are being given to refugees and displaced persons, particularly families that have suffered as a result of the conflict. We are trying to reconstruct houses, bridges and roads and to rebuild the social and industrial infrastructure.

All of these measures are having a positive impact on the situation of women, who form the majority of our population. Pursuant to the Beijing decisions, in Tajikistan we are continuing to implement measures to ensure equality for women and men. Our new constitution, adopted after a nationwide referendum, guarantees equal rights for men and women. Legal, social and economic equality for women is enshrined in our labour law and in the codes governing marriage and the family and employment and education. The code governing health devotes special attention to that issue. Women now have free choice in the area of reproductive health. This has resulted in a decrease in maternal death from abortions from 30 per cent to 11 per cent.

In our country, we are now working on a national plan to enhance the status of women for the period 1998 to 2005. It focuses on the 12 main areas of concern so as to enhance the role of women in our society and improve their well-being. We are now taking a special approach. The commission responsible for implementing the plan of action for women is headed by a woman and has become the driving force and a catalyst in introducing new approaches to gender issues.

We are continuing to involve more women at the State level in Tajikistan, and women's participation at the management level currently stands at 16 per cent. Women's enormous intellectual capacity and potential in professional activities and business is being developed, and this can be seen particularly at the local level. There are four female chairpersons of local governments, and 95 per cent of the deputies at the local government level are women. In Tajikistan today, it is quite common now to see a woman deputizing in the Government, acting as vice-chairperson in Parliament or heading or deputizing in a major company. Women are becoming more actively involved in managing government and in the social and political life of the country. All of this is due, to a significant extent, to the efforts of our President, Mr. Rakhmonov.

Women are active in the restoration of peace and concord in Tajikistan, and, together with men, they are involved in post-conflict peace-building. Legal guarantees have been given, and the political situation is now stable. The Government is interested in developing the political activity of women. Today, there is a new attitude throughout our society. In the past five years, we have established 54 new women's non-governmental organizations, which are actively working together with the Government. Many of them are operating tax free, and I should like to point out that 35 per cent of all the non-governmental organizations operating in our country are headed by women.

The Government's policy of creating a socially oriented market economy has opened up new opportunities for women. In conjunction with the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank, and with the aim of providing greater economic freedom for women and developing their full potential, programmes for financing women's entrepreneurship have been developed and are being implemented. Another programme is being implemented for providing microcredit to women and households headed by women. These and other measures by the Government of Tajikistan are aimed at combining efforts to make complex decisions on how to improve the standard of living, first of all by determining the full magnitude of the problem of poverty.

Over 80 per cent of the Tajik population lives below the poverty line, and there is a disturbing tendency towards the feminization of poverty in our country. The problem is aggravated by the fact that most families have many children and women have to take on the traditional duties of child care in addition to their economic activity. The difficult economic situation, the destruction of the former traditional way of life, the low level of education and the impossibility of finding a job in one's own field of specialization have led some women to reject their old standards and values. Unfortunately, criminal groups are now quite often drawing women into illegal activities, particularly in the drug trade, which is becoming a fast-growing nucleus of the underground economy of Central Asia. We have to unite our efforts to combat this worldwide scourge.

Another major concern of the Tajik Government is the health of the population, and particularly of women and children. The civil war devastated our health sector, and many qualified medical personnel

left the country. There was a particularly difficult situation in the southern and eastern parts of the country, where as a result of fighting, many hospitals were fully or partially destroyed, and all the medical equipment was irretrievably lost.

As a result, the number of births taking place at home has gone up to 30 per cent, 90 per cent of which take place without the attendance of medical personnel. As a result, every tenth newborn dies, and every fourth newborn suffers from various medical problems.

The difficult economic situation and the lack of adequate nutrition has led to a 60 per cent incidence of anaemia in Tajik women of childbearing age, and in recent years there has been an increase of 150 per cent in the incidence of this ailment in young girls.

In order to resolve these problems, the Government has developed a national programme to combat anaemia. We hope that the donor countries and international organizations will continue to give us the necessary support in solving this and other urgent problems relating to women.

The conflict in Tajikistan has caused significant damage to the environment and to agriculture, which leads us once again to consider the problem of the population's access to potable water. Our mountainous region, which acts as a water tower for all of Central Asia does not experience water shortages as such. The problem is in getting sufficient quality and quantity of clean drinking water. There is a well-known statistic that half of the population of the world lives in unhealthy conditions because of water pollution, which causes over 5 million deaths and 3 billion cases of sickness every year. Women and children are particularly susceptible to infectious diseases. In order to draw the attention of the world community to this global problem, Tajikistan has proposed that the year 2003 be declared the international year for fresh water. We hope that our initiative will be supported by Member States and that an appropriate resolution can be adopted at the forthcoming fifty-fifth session of the United Nations General Assembly.

The Tajik people's traditional system of values has always attached special importance and honour to women. Since time immemorial we have had a tradition of great respect for women as mothers, for women in charge of the home, for the peace, love, well-being, creativity and prosperity that we associate with women. While firmly supporting the principles and spirit of the Beijing Platform for Action, the Government of Tajikistan sees its main task as creating all the necessary conditions for strengthening and developing the potential of every human being and eliminating all kinds of gender inequality. We have the potential needed to develop a society of equal rights and equal opportunities, embodying the interests of both men and women.

The peace and stability that have been restored in our country offer assurance that Tajikistan will move towards sustainable development and creativity into the twenty-first century.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Yu-Foo Yee Shoon, Senior Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Community Development of Singapore.

Mrs. Yu-Foo (Singapore): It gives me great pleasure to participate in this special session of the General Assembly. The Government of Singapore remains committed to achieving the goals set by the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. We hope this consultative process will provide new insights and achieve concrete progress on the advancement of women in the new millennium.

Five years ago, 189 countries adopted by consensus the 12 critical areas outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action and pledged to achieve gender equality. I thank the Assembly for granting me the privilege of sharing with it how Singapore has transformed rhetoric into reality in showing our support for this global enterprise.

The Beijing Platform for Action has served as a reference point in the continuing process of formulating Singapore's policies. I am pleased to report that many recommendations have been implemented and that progress is continuing.

For example, in the area of women and violence, Singapore amended the Women's Charter to further enhance the protection of our women from violence and expand the legal rights to protection of married women. Our penal code was also amended in 1998 to enhance the protection of migrant domestic workers, who are mostly women.

With regard to women and human rights, Singapore has adopted an equal opportunity policy grounded on the principle of meritocracy. This principle underpins the planning and implementation of

our public policies. Singapore women have equal access to basic soci. ! services, including education and health.

When Singapore gained independence in 1965, infant mortality was high, the literacy rate was low and a large proportion of the population was without proper housing. We have reduced our maternal mortality rate per thousand live and still births to below 1 per cent. Since 1995, our female infant mortality rate has hovered at around 5 per thousand resident live births.

The literacy rate of Singapore women aged 15 years and older continues to improve, rising to 89 per cent in 1998. Today, females in universities and polytechnics constitute almost half of total enrolment. More females are entering traditionally male-dominated domains. For example, in 1994, only one in eight engineering students was female. This rose to one in three in 1998. Ownership of housing by women climbed from 48 per cent in 1992 to 51 per cent this year.

We recognize that working women face many challenges, balancing their multiple roles as workers, mothers, wives and daughters. Hence, generous tax incentives for working women have been introduced and employers are encouraged to grant special leave to working women whose children fall sick. The Government provides childcare subsidies for working mothers who place their children in childcare centres. Subsidized childcare places grew from 15,200 in 1990 to 44,000 in 1999. These measures have enabled Singaporean women to fulfil their ambitions to have both career and family life. They also increased the female labour participation rate from 40 per cent in 1990 to 53 per cent in 1999.

Not only are there more women in employment and in fields traditionally the preserve of men, but more women are also earning higher pay. In 1994, only 18 per cent of working women, or about 113,400, earned more than S$2,000 per month. Within five years, this number rose by 146 per cent.

One of the Beijing Platform for Action concerns is women and decision-making. The proportion of women holding professional, technical, managerial and executive positions has increased from 29 per cent to 35 per cent over the past five years. Women have also contributed significantly to community and national development. Last year, 42 per cent of the recipients of our National Day Awards were women. These Awards are the highest form of recognition in Singapore.

More women are now occupying higher positions of authority. In 1994, there were no women judges in the High Court and only 18 per cent of the Subordinate Court judges were women. Since 1999, two female High Court Judges have been appointed and 44 per cent of Subordinate Court judges are now women. Last year, the first woman commander of a police division, the first woman permanent secretary in the Civil Service and the first woman to head an information technology statutory board were appointed.

In 1999, the Ministry of Manpower, the National Trades Union Congress and the Singapore National Employers Federation issued the Tripartite Guidelines on Non-Discriminatory Job Advertisements to educate and assist employers. The proportion of job advertisements stipulating discriminatory criteria, including gender, dropped from 32 per cent in January 1999 to below 1 per cent this year.

Exciting new opportunities await Singapore's women as we move towards a knowledge-based economy. Technology will help women to be in a better position to help themselves. For example, the Singapore Professional and Business Women's Association launched FemmE-Net in October 1999 as a resource for Asian women entrepreneurs. As self-actualization increasingly comes within the reach of many women, men and women alike must continue to exercise sound fundamental values that strengthen family and social cohesion. In Singapore, we see a continuing need for individuals, the community and the Government to work in partnership to improve the quality of life of women, men, and our families.

To demonstrate our commitment to the advancement of women, Singapore acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women shortly after we adopted the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995. An inter-ministerial committee was then set-up to oversee the implementation of the Convention. I am pleased to report that Singapore's initial report was submitted to the United Nations in November last year.

To conclude, negotiations on the outcome document to be adopted at this special session have been challenging. My delegation would like to place on record our appreciation for the hard work done by the Preparatory Committee and by all negotiating partners

in reaching a new set of action plans to take us into the next decade. The new document from this session should complement our respective countries' efforts, where relevant. It should encourage meaningful cooperation between Governments and civil society. It is in this spirit that my Government renews its commitment to the Beijing + 5 process.

The Acting President: I should like to advise representatives that, at the pace at which we are proceeding, we will not be able to finish in time for this morning's meeting and therefore two speakers will have to be carried over to the afternoon meeting.

May I therefore implore speakers to limit the time of their speeches to the seven minutes allowed here in the General Assembly.

I now give the floor to Mrs. Guadalupe Gomez-Maganda, General Coordinator of the National Commission for Women of Mexico.

Mrs. Gomez-Maganda (Mexico): The Mexican delegation congratulates Mr. Gurirab and wishes him the greatest success during this special session of the General Assembly on "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century".

Our delegation is composed of legislators, public servants and women of civil society, who reflect the plurality of our nation. Five years after the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, the Government of Mexico is represented in this Assembly to ratify its commitment to the ongoing implementation of the Platform for Action and to speak of the achievements attained towards the common objective of improving the social condition of women.

We have undertaken many actions, among which are enhanced legislation on behalf of women and the building of an institutional framework to embody the commitment of the public power towards gender equity.

In 1996, the President of the Republic, Mr. Ernesto Zedillo, instituted the National Programme for Women, a preceptive government instrument that defines commitments and actions to guarantee the full exercise by girls and women of their human rights and the benefits of development, under conditions equal to those enjoyed by men. It is helping to translate into reality the principle of legal equality for men and women, as set forth in article 4 of our Constitution. The creation of the National Commission for Women, a body responsible for coordinating and following up the Programme, was a step forward and has fostered the incorporation of the gender approach in public policies.

At the federal legislative level, we have established Commissions on gender and equity and a bicameral Commission in the Women's Parliament, which have had a decisive influence in the setting up of a legal framework with a gender perspective free of discriminatory provisions against women.

In addition to these achievements, the Commission has advocated the creation of similar bodies at the State government and congress level the enacting of laws, and coordinated action to promote the status of women.

Due to the broad convergence between the areas of special concern of the Beijing Platform for Action and the guidelines of our own national programme, I will highlight but a few of the most relevant actions that have been carried out in compliance with the Platform.

In order to give greater visibility to the status of women and to their contributions to development, statistics are needed that are broken down by gender; we have compiled them. We also have a system of gender indicators that has enabled us to closely monitor the status of Mexican women.

In the educational sector, we have eliminated inequities with respect to access to schooling and the attendance of girls and young women. We have also opposed sexist content and attitudes in teaching, devoting particular attention to rural and indigenous women as well as marginalized urban women, many of whom are illiterate.

In the area of health care, progress can be seen in the higher life expectancy for Mexican women: 77 years of age. We have instituted a national health card for women, which has made it possible to provide them with lifelong health care. We have made headway in the prevention and treatment of cervical, uterine and breast cancer, and we have expanded family-planning and reproductive health services. Special attention has also been given to the prevention and management of pregnancy among adolescents.

In order to deal with the problem of poverty, we have promoted productive activities for women, in particular for rural and indigenous women, to whom

we have devoted resources at least equal to those allocated to men.

The process of modernization in my country and the rising educational level among women has given them access to better and more numerous jobs. We are also assisting rural women's agricultural groups by providing loans and diversifying their activities.

In the area of human rights, I would like to highlight our compliance with international commitments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Belém do Pará, as well as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, whose Optional Protocol Mexico was one of the first countries to sign. We must also stress the reforms made to our Constitution aimed at helping crime victims and ensuring respect for the rights of children, who are already benefiting from a law on the protection of the rights of children and adolescents.

Legal spouses and partners of female State workers now receive medical care, and we have also instituted sanctions against domestic violence.

Laws require public policies that guarantee compliance with them. That is why we have developed a national programme against domestic violence, which, along with investigations, has contributed to raising awareness of, and preventing, this very severe social problem. We have also promoted the training and sensitization of those involved in the justice field, which has led to better care for victims of violence.

Despite the fact that women's involvement in the public sphere has increased - for the first time, a woman holds the post of Minister for Foreign Affairs, and the number of female members of Parliament and senators has increased — genuine access by women to decision-making positions still remains to be attained. These and other actions, achieved thanks to the combined efforts of Government and civil society, are detailed in the report we have circulated to delegations.

It is clear that the situation of Mexican women has improved substantially. Nevertheless, we are still far from achieving the objectives we have set for ourselves. We will have to step up our efforts to reduce maternal mortality and the vulnerability of poor indigenous women and disabled and elderly women, as well as broaden opportunities for women in the labour market and eliminate the legal obstacles that still infringe on their rights.

We must also stress a more equitable distribution of domestic and family responsibilities. We will continue to strive to implement affirmative action measures in order to guarantee that the attention given to women's affairs and to gender equity becomes State policy.

Mexico's ratification of the Declaration and Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women has encouraged our Government and all Mexican women to continue the quest for equity and equal opportunity. The goal we have set for ourselves has been a key catalyst for the progress we have achieved. Five years after Beijing, the balance sheet is generally positive. Institutions that promote the advancement of have been consolidated, as has the commitment of the State and society as a whole to follow the path of equity and gender equality.

We will continue our efforts to forge a more democratic nation, based on justice, with the full and equal participation of all Mexican men and women.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Amelou Benítez-Reyes, Chairperson, National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women of the Philippines.

Mrs. Amelou Benítez-Reyes (Philippines): My delegation appreciates all of the efforts undertaken in preparation for this conference. With mixed feelings of fulfilment and anxiety, my delegation is pleased to report the Philippines' assessment of the achievements registered and the obstacles encountered in the pursuit of the many commitments we have made.

Our assessment, made jointly with the Philippine Non-Governmental Organization Score Board, has shown critical areas that require further attention by the Government, through the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women, in partnership with line agencies and non-governmental organizations.

Since Beijing, the lives of Filipino women have been seriously affected by the financial crisis that hit the region. The advent of globalization and its negative consequences have exacerbated the pressures we are experiencing and affected our ability to effectively implement the commitments made at the Conference. What has enabled us to cope with all of the demands of a growing population is the Philippines' commitment to strengthening the national machinery to advance the status of women — the first in Asia — which was

established in 1975, predating the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1979. Against the backdrop of the harsh realities that confronted us during that period, the Philippine Government, together with non-governmental organizations and key institutions of civil society, endeavoured to honour its commitments, registering the following achievements.

First, the Philippine Gender-Responsive Planning programme facilitated the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, with six-year implementation schedules coinciding with the Government's medium-term plan. This has served as an operational guide for the Government and all of its institutional partners in implementing the strategic objectives of the Philippine commitments to the Beijing Platform: an integrated approach to gender, poverty and governance.

The planning and implementation of gender-responsive programmes and projects has been integrated into the roles and responsibilities of public officials and their staff through individual performance contracts.

Because some plans failed for lack of resources, the Philippine Government took the bold step of initiating affirmative action in the area of budgeting, spearheaded by Senator Shahani since 1975, by legislating a gender and development budget policy through the annual Appropriations Act. This Act directs all Government institutions to allocate no less than 5 percent of their total budgets to implement the development plan for women's empowerment. Presently 134 Government agencies have complied with this budget policy, from 69 in 1998.

We have also initiated a gender audit to address the barriers, obstacles and lack of access to resources for women's empowerment. The gender and development focal points were also organized into a nationwide network for capability-building, gender-responsive planning, budgeting and monitoring. Women's contributions and achievements in various areas of our national life have been systematically recorded as "Herstory", a tool for gender planning in the absence of gender statistics.

Modules and tools for gender mainstreaming at the national and local levels have been adopted with a view to setting up local commissions on women in 79 provinces and 1,600 municipalities.

Private and public colleges and universities are encouraged to provide certification for different levels of gender and development training: advocacy, gender focal persons, gender experts and gender specialists.

The Civil Service Commission has implemented gender and development principles in the recruitment, placement and retention of Government personnel by instituting a quota of 30 per cent in senior positions in the civil service.

We have also instituted legislation at the national level. The Philippines initiated resolutions on migrant workers, rural women, women in indigenous communities, women with disabilities and older women. In the health agenda, we have placed special emphasis on mental health for special groups. The Philippines also signed the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and Congress has begun the process of its ratification.

At the national level most of the laws with discriminatory provisions have been amended, in compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. Now new bills are subjected to gender analysis prior to enactment.

My delegation feels very strongly about three priority concerns: migrant workers, trafficking in women and children and violence against women. We join delegations from countries with large populations of migrant workers in seeking ways to provide for their return and reintegration into our societies.

The practice of mail-order brides has been outlawed. Recently, with the support of the United States Government, the Philippines hosted the Asian Regional Initiative Against Trafficking in Women and Children to adopt programmes of action for a lasting solution to the problem of trafficking that includes prevention, protection, prosecution and integration. This afternoon a panel will report on these to the United Nations.

In response to cases of violence against women, 1,400 women's desks have been established in police precincts. Family courts have been established as well to deal with family-related cases of violence.

We have adopted a progressive law on rape that took nine long years to enact. It covers a wide definition of rape, imposes stiffer penalties for

offenders and recognizes the existence of marital rape. Sexual harassment has also been outlawed.

Poverty remains the single biggest factor that limits women's opportunities. Our Government has strengthened women's perspectives within the national anti-poverty programme of the Estrada Administration by including representation of the women's sector at the policy level. This has helped vulnerable women's groups that are included among the programme targets.

Recently, we launched a 4 billion peso loan for women entrepreneurs in order to provide women with access to credit, training, markets, information and technology. A national vocational training centre for women was established and offers regular courses on entrepreneurship in non-traditional occupations.

Recognizing that regional and economic policies impact differently on women and men, we have pursued the development of a framework for the integration of women in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, after holding a ministerial meeting on women. This framework was adopted by the APEC leaders in 1998 and led to the organization of an ad hoc group on gender information. The Philippines has been designated the Project Overseer, to conduct gender information sessions in all the various APEC working groups.

The Philippine Government will reiterate its commitment to the Platform for Action and Optional Protocol by establishing the Philippine Development Authority for Women, which will expand the functions of the national machinery from policy review and formulation to coordinating the implementation of plans and programmes and setting up local offices in collaboration with non-governmental organizations and private corporations.

It is our vision to institute an effective accountability system through the Gender Mainstreaming Management System and a better way of identifying the programmes and projects for women's empowerment and gender equity in the entire budget and bureaucracy.

To fill the gaps in and overcome obstacles to the effective implementation of the Platform, we shall explore with foreign donors and private benefactors the setting up of a 1 billion peso trust fund, the earnings of which should assist the women's movement and accelerate implementation of the Platform for Action.

We wish to get Members' support for fast-tracking State actions beyond Beijing + 5. With the extensive experience and insight gained by national machineries, we are proposing a regional mechanism for South-South cooperation that will be able to establish systematic collaboration and exchanges of experience among national machineries.

Finally, we recommend a global fund for millennium women. Unless new sources of funds and resources are made available, the prospects for achieving the objectives of the Platform for Action within the next five years remain dim. We propose a $1 billion fund, to be set up by a United Nations agency, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank or another financial institution, or through national machineries authorized by their Governments to lend at a very low interest rate, for the continued implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Our work is far from over. Women's leadership in the new millennium should manifest unique qualities, strength, compassion and faith, and particularly caring, healing and nurturing. These are essential to finding a social paradigm that will bring about peace rather than violence and aggression, and a better life for all.

Let us look at the outcome document as an opportunity and a challenge for all of us to translate it into a policy of governance that combines women's potentials and needs. After all, effective governance without gender perspective is no governance at all.

The Acting President: I call on Mrs. Ruth Cardoso, President of the Council of Comunidade Solidária of Brazil.

Mrs. Cardoso (Brazil) (*spoke in Spanish*): May I begin by congratulating the President on his election to lead this special session and wish him every success in the work ahead. I am especially pleased to once again convey the commitment of the Brazilian Government to protecting and fostering women's rights. This presents us with an opportunity to forge a new agenda for gender equality, one that is in keeping with contemporary society and that makes social development and world peace in the twenty-first century its highest priorities.

Brazil took an active part in the regional preparatory meeting and is a party to the Lima Consensus. The Brazilian Government wishes to underscore its support for and firm commitment to the

principles and decisions adopted by the international community at Beijing.

For Brazil, the Beijing Platform for Action enshrines an ideal and a set of innovative guidelines that have exercised a decisive and motivating influence on Brazilian society as a whole. Government support, the responsiveness and dedication shown by our congresswomen, the active and organized action of women and the crucial role of the media — these have all been influential in enhancing the quality of life for Brazilian women.

An important instrument in this process has been the implementation of the so-called equality strategies drawn up by the National Council for Women's Rights, together with federal guidelines aimed at translating the Beijing recommendations and adapting them to the reality of the Brazilian context.

The same conviction that motivated the Government and civil society to ensure that women effectively enjoy full civil rights in Brazil has guided the entire preparatory process, leading up to Brazil's participation in Beijing + 5. In October 1999, the Brazilian Government set up the National Committee, over which I preside, and which brings together representatives from Government, Congress and civil society. This Committee has sought to identify Brazilian specificities within the critical areas of the Platform for Action. It has also undertaken studies and research projects to help flesh out Brazil's answers to the questionnaire presented by the United Nations. Furthermore, it has laid the groundwork for a national paper documenting the complex nature of the issues involved, the progress achieved and the obstacles still facing Brazilian women. This paper is available here at the special session and on the Internet.

The National Committee worked closely with representatives of civil society with a view to identifying areas where progress has been made and to developing a new agenda on gender issues for Brazil.

I should therefore like to provide a few examples of the successful programmes that have been set up over the past five years: organization of our national human rights programme in 1996, which is closely involved in protecting women's rights; increased attention to combating violence against women, which has involved strengthening the awareness of police precincts on women's issues as well as upgrading shelters for women; improvement in educational indicators, which in Brazil favour girls and women, in literacy, access to schooling, completion of primary school and enrolment in secondary and higher educational institutions; the recent introduction into Brazilian schools of parameters for a national curriculum including a number of topics to be included in the teaching of all traditional subjects with a view to combating all forms of discrimination; the enactment of a women's general health programme to improve the quality of prenatal health services and to reduce the rates of caesarean section deliveries — indeed, a programme to reduce maternal mortality rates, which remain high, was launched only last week at Brasilia; programmes to reduce cervical and breast cancer have come on stream, in response to a recurrent demand of women's organizations; the establishment of new health facilities, both governmental and private, to deal with the growing number of adolescent pregnancies; Government-funded schemes, in partnership with private organizations, to combat sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS; hiring of community health personnel in remote localities to provide prenatal and vaccination services and support for the elderly; the creation of a credit programme, some 32 per cent of whose funds have gone to women; and effective poverty alleviation policies, such as our minimum income programme, which supplements the personal income of senior citizens, the majority of whom are women, and of families with children up to the age of 14 with the requirement that all school-age children regularly attend classes.

Yet we must recognize that many challenges still lie ahead. In fact, despite the significant percentage of women in the work force, their pay still lags behind that of men at all educational levels. In order to overcome discriminatory practices, the Government has encouraged training for the female labour force. To that end, an equal opportunity programme has been introduced in the civil service.

As concerns access to power, progress has been slower. We have, however, adopted important measures, such as election quotas, not to mention the unprecedented appointment of women judges to the higher courts. Women in Brazil have also gained increased access to the media. Their views are increasingly aired and there is growing editorial interest in their particular agenda. They occupy key positions in the media and are distinguished television

news anchors and political and economic commentators, previously an exclusively male domain.

Women account for almost half of all Internet users. The fact that they are at the helm of 25 of the best 100 cybersites in Brazil is suggestive of the new opportunities for self-expression and communication that Brazilian society increasingly offers.

The work of our National Committee has already borne fruit: the Brazilian Government has decided to review the institutional status of the women's rights programme by bringing it directly within the purview of the office of the Minister of Justice. Additionally, the Committee has been entrusted with the task of monitoring public policies as they relate to women's issues.

The world has just passed over the threshold of a new century that is witnessing a revolution wrought by new information technologies and a change in economic paradigms. A new knowledge-based world is emerging and with it new challenges. As these events unfold, women must not be left behind. The international community must continually strive to infuse public policies with a gender-centred perspective that will in fact benefit all segments of society.

Notwithstanding the need to foster the human rights of women, it behoves the international community to identify new themes that will be important for women in the twenty-first century. The recasting of the relationship with men on an equal and equitable footing will enable us to review our work-related conceptions and norms, to redefine the connection between public and private spaces, to re-evaluate those qualities that are narrowly defined as being feminine and to open the way for all to benefit from modern technology. Those are some of the themes of the future.

It has aptly been said the twenty-first century will be the century in which women come into their own. I share that hope, for only thus will we enjoy democracy in all its plenitude. These concepts must not be isolated. An effective policy to foster women's rights is a powerful guarantee that our societies will become more democratic. We are on the right track. It is time for us confidently to prepare for the challenges of the future.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Manel Abeysekera, Chairperson of the National Committee on Women of Sri Lanka.

Mrs. Abeysekera (Sri Lanka): Sri Lanka is happy to be participating in this special session of the General Assembly on women, which, perhaps significantly, is the first special session of the new millennium, especially as we have participated in all conferences on this subject for a quarter of a century, since the first in 1975.

Women in Sri Lanka, historically and culturally, have had a role of significance and importance in society, beginning, of course, with the basic unit of society: the family. In fact, our history reveals that we have had a fair gender balance, with Sri Lankan women enjoying a high degree of equality, visibility and decision-making in the home and in society. It would appear that, during our colonial era from the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, we came under the influence of the conservatism and puritanism characteristic of European society of the time.

However, since regaining our independence, we have endeavoured to redress the balance. In this context, I am happy to state that the present leadership of Sri Lanka is in the hands of a woman leader, President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, who led us into this new millennium, having been re-elected recently for a second consecutive term as President of the Republic, and that Sirimavo R. D. Bandaranaike, Member of Parliament, who is Prime Minister for the third time in her illustrious political career, had the singular distinction of being the world's first woman Prime Minister and head of Government. It was because of this distinction she conferred on women, and the inspiration she gave them, that she was invited by the United Nations to deliver the keynote address to the first United Nations World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975, which set in motion the United Nations Decade for Women and the successive world conferences, the fifth of which we are participating in today.

I would like to highlight here some information on the status of women of Sri Lanka to indicate both its positive and negative aspects. Women make up more than half the population. We have a woman as President, a woman as Prime Minister and a woman as Minister of Women's Affairs. Women provide the key financial input into the economy when we consider the

agricultural sector, the plantation sector, the migrant workers' remittances and the garment sector.

Women received the vote in 1931, together with men. Although women are politically conscious, the proportion of women who actively participate in politics is low. Women are poorly represented in Parliament and at provincial and local levels, and therefore there is concern that their issues are inadequately voiced.

Girls, together with boys, have enjoyed free education since 1945. The literacy rate among women over 10 years of age is 89 per cent, and in the population under 45, it is equal to that of men. Girls equal boys in terms of their numbers at the secondary level, reaching 56.1 per cent, and outstrip them at the post-secondary level, where the rate is 21.7 per cent for girls, as against 19.5 per cent for boys. Girls outnumber boys in several university faculties. Yet the unemployment rate for women is 17.5 per cent, as compared with 6.4 per cent for men.

While there are more women than men employed in the health and education services, only one tenth of engineering and technical posts are occupied by women. While our infant mortality rate is quite low, at 17 per 1,000 — a consequence of the State-sponsored free health care that has existed for several decades — we are faced with the problem of underweight babies, which is mainly caused by malnutrition during pregnancy.

Despite far-reaching amendments to our penal code since 1995 so as to include sexual harassment within its ambit, to increase penalties for such crimes as rape and to create women's and children's desks at 37 key police stations, violence against women continues in both the domestic and public spheres.

This picture of gender imbalance is not unique to Sri Lanka and, if we are to advance the status of women, we need to ask ourselves why this is so. If one accepts the principle that all human beings are equal in terms of their rights, one wonders how the unequal bias against women came about. I venture to think that in the early development of humankind sheer physical strength was required for the very existence of human beings battling the elements and other live creatures. Here, man would certainly have scored over woman and become the procurer and the protector, venturing forth and taking initiatives and action to provide food, clothing and shelter, as well as protection, for his own family. In such a scenario, the woman would perhaps have generally remained indoors, fulfilling her biological role of child bearing and child rearing.

However, in the course of time, when living conditions, amenities and facilities improved, it became clear that, although both men and women enjoyed these benefits, they did not necessarily do so on equal terms. Patriarchy had entrenched itself in society and in the minds of men and even of women. History has become "his story" and not hers, too. But when terrible times fell upon humankind, such as world wars, women were called upon to perform tasks and duties outside the home which had been regarded as being within the male sphere, and at the end of those wars they were expected to go back to the confines of the home. This gave rise to the protest movements which found an echo in many countries where women came forward to agitate on issues that concerned them, not merely on gender discrimination, but also on national issues such as, in our part of the world, the elimination of colonialism.

Thus it is not surprising that the cause of women's equality — women make up more than half of the population of States — became a concern of the United Nations, which we must thank for keeping it in focus for over a quarter of a century.

What we need to ask ourselves is: how far has this focus resulted in eliminating discrimination against women, and how far have we come as we meet together at this forum dedicated to the cause of women? We have to admit that the path we have trodden has not been easy: it has been uphill and beset with many obstacles. We have advanced — yet, perhaps, not far enough.

The question then arises as to what more we should do to achieve gender equality and equity. There are many things we can and should do. In the short time allocated to me, I would like to share with the Assembly a few thoughts in this regard. If we want to achieve anything for society, we must be prepared to accept what we are trying to achieve and change our attitude so as to bring it about. In other words, change can come through the minds of human beings, thoughts and ideas giving rise to positive action. This must start with the individual man and woman, then reach out into the community, the nation and, finally, the whole international community.

We must accept women's equality and equity as a human right. We cannot accept any group of persons — and certainly not half the population of the world — being marginalized in terms of their rights.

Sri Lanka prides itself on being a democracy, and our constitution enshrines the principle of equality and non-discrimination. If women are to be equal, a sharing role for both men and women is implied, whether in the home or outside it, both making policy decisions as well as benefiting from them in all spheres of activity, from the socio-economic to the political and to peacemaking, conflict resolution and peacekeeping. Gender equality and balance cannot be promoted piecemeal. They must be approached holistically, through gender mainstreaming in every sphere of life.

All of our States need our people to work towards a better life for us all. Can we do that without the involvement of half our population — our women — and without harnessing their talents, capacity and capabilities? Can we have true development, which must be for humankind, without involving half of it? Perhaps the reason for our not having progressed in development as much as we should have is that, by and large, we have not involved women in the process. Research has established that societies which have developed are those in which the status of women is advanced.

Women must be permitted to do what they wish to attempt to do in terms of activity outside the home. They must do so voluntarily; there should be no stereotype for women, whether as wives and mothers — a vital and highly respected role — or as working women and career women who combine both roles. What needs to be removed are the barriers confining women to the home and those preventing them from advancing to a position of equality with men both within and outside the home. We need to have policies and mechanisms to achieve gender mainstreaming and gender balance, but no amount of contrivances are going to help the process if they lack the moving spirit of sincerity, with — as the documentation for this session stresses — men supporting women in the task.

I believe that, even if all the mechanisms recommended are put in place, we will not advance the cause of women if we — men, especially, but women, too — are not sincere or convinced. The advancement of women starts with the recognition by women themselves of their self-worth and their potential. Women must not be regarded as inferiors, to be battered or treated as sex objects or merchandise, and women must not accept such treatment: they must think positive and act positive.

Violence in whatever form is unacceptable in civilized society. The victims of violence are often women and children. Violence — from domestic violence to terrorism and armed conflict — has been a major deterrent to the advancement and empowerment of women. The ugly situation of terrorism prevails in Sri Lanka today, and concern about it has prevented our women leaders from being present at this session. It is incumbent on all of us — men, women and the international community in general — to eradicate the scourge of all forms of violence from the face of the earth, not only for the sake of the advancement of women but also for the dignity and worth of all human beings.

Women must discuss all issues confronting them, not only with women — the convinced and the converted, as is often the case — but also with men, who must assist in the process of gender mainstreaming. The day we stop talking about women's issues will be the day of gender equality and equity. Let us therefore, at this special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century", rededicate ourselves to sincerity of effort in a cause that simply cannot be ignored if humanity is to progress, and accept a new paradigm of shared male and female styles of leadership, responsibility and action for the good of us all.

Sri Lanka ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women as far back as 1981. We in Sri Lanka will continue to work for the advancement of women while maintaining our cultural and religious heritage of valuing the family, which is the microcosm and nucleus of a society in which gender balance can go a long way towards achieving gender equality and equity, resulting in a healthy and happy nation.

We are committed to the Beijing Platform for Action, based on which we have a National Plan of Action for 2001-2005. At the end of that period we hope that, as the Political Declaration submitted to this Conference envisages, there will be a review of national and international action. We hope that the

outcome document and other documents of this session will give us further material and ideas for achieving our common goal. I wish our deliberations at this session success, and hope that all of us will be able to take away from it much inspiration and new initiatives on how we may further the cause of gender equality and equity. For without it, I do not think we can have true development and peace in the twenty-first century, which is our tripartite goal, as the theme of our session indicates.

The meeting rose at 1.20 p.m.